

10/11/2003

Misleading to say HIV infection rate under control

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WITH reference to the report "90pc of HIV cases in Malaysia are men" (NST, Nov 5) quoting Health Ministry Parliamentary Secretary S. Sothinathan to the Dewan Negara, I would like to point out a few facts related to the statistics which were not made clear.

While 93.8 per cent of HIV cases in Malaysia are men, this is down from 95 per cent only three years ago. The number of women becoming infected, while still small, compared to men, has been doubling in the past few years. This is an indication that the epidemic is reaching out into the general population, and is no longer confined to the so-called "high-risk" groups.

Further statistics from the ministry indicate that most of the infected women are wives and partners of infected men. These women far exceed the numbers of sex workers who are getting infected.

While 54,914 cases have been reported up to June this year, it should be noted that this is a conservative number and there are no estimates as to the actual number of infections.

In 2002, almost 7,000 new infections were reported, the highest number ever in a single year. If the trend of the first half of 2003 continues, the reported numbers for 2003 will exceed that for 2002.

As a comparison, Australia's total cumulative reported HIV cases to the end of 2002 were 19,674, for roughly the same population as Malaysia. We therefore now have three times more than Australia, for an epidemic that started later than theirs. Furthermore, in 2002, Australia had 800 newly-diagnosed cases while we had almost 10 times that number.

In this light, it is highly misleading to say that the HIV infection rate among the public is under control. According to the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, Malaysia has the fifth fastest growing epidemic in Asia and the Pacific.

Earlier this year, two UNAIDS consultants concluded that at the rate we are going, Malaysia will have a generalised epidemic (rather than that which is confined to certain groups only) within five years.

It is the sort of complacency that quotes numbers without analysis that allows the epidemic to spread. It is high time we faced up to the fact that our hospitals are seeing more and more people ill and dying with AIDS every day, and the consequences of this, including an increasing number of AIDS orphans.

As long as we refuse to face up to reality and put in place the sort of prevention programmes that we need, we will have to resign ourselves to an ever-growing epidemic that has killed and will kill far more people than the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS).

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